

# Acquisition of the English Article System: Some Preliminary Findings

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## 1. Introduction

It has often been said that the acquisition of the article system can be problematic for any learners of English, especially when such a system is absent in their L1 (Butler 2002; Berry 1991; Master, 1987, 1988; Thomas, 1989; Yamada & Matsuura 1982). Up until now, most studies have concentrated on Speaker Referent/Hearer Known (Huebner 1983; 1985), simplified grammars (McEldowney 1977; Master 1990), principled descriptive accounts (Berry 1991) or the developmental processes of article acquisition (Yamada & Matsuura 1982). This study will take a more lexical approach and examine the localised contexts of article usage among Japanese EFL students.

### 1.1 Aim

The main aim of this essay is to explain how Japanese EFL students use the English article. An attempt will also be made to ascertain the deciding factors in their choice of article. If strong trends emerge from them regarding non-native like usage, then it is hoped that these errors can be used in teaching JSE differences between their L1 and L2 in the future. Although there have already been a few studies conducted in this area (as indicated above) this study will depart from them by looking more

closely at lexical items local to the node article in question. It is believed by the author that many of the errors being committed among Japanese EFL students occur as a result of this phenomenon.

#### Research Questions:

1. To what extent are Japanese EFL students influenced by the locality of lexical items in the immediate environments of the article in question?
2. Is this problem restricted to elementary students, or does it persist in intermediate Japanese EFL students as well?
3. What are the reasons for this phenomenon?
4. What can be done to resolve this situation?

### 1.2 Terms

For the sake of simplicity, the three categories: *a/an*; *the*;  $\emptyset$  will be used. The following general terms will be used interchangeably: indefinite article, definite article and zero article respectively. The latter will not only include nouns which have article contrast (1-2) such as:

1.  $\emptyset$  *Music* is nice when it is played softly.
2. *The music* you're listening to is too loud!

but it will also include the following type of constructions (3-4) involving no article contrast (see Quirk et. al. 1985: 246) which are judged ungrammatical:

3. The Pope is from  $\emptyset$  Poland.
4. \*The Pope is from *the* Poland.

I shall use Huebner's (1983; 1985) terms regarding referentiality (although the subcategories of them will deviate somewhat). These are [SR] for Speaker Referent; and [HK] for Hearer Known. They will be used with

the following  $\pm$  binary distinctions.

Three groups of subjects took part in this study: Japanese high school students; Japanese college students; and a control group of native speakers. They will be referred to as J1; J2; and NS1 respectively.

## 2. Literature Review

Huebner (1983; 1985) in a longitudinal case study of L2 acquisition, examined the use of the definite article by an adult Hmong speaker during which his subject did not receive formal English instruction. Huebner found that his subject initially overused and overgeneralised with the definite article with almost all nouns, and he labelled this phenomenon *flooding*. Gradually, the amount of flooding of the definite article *the* decreased in [-SR, -HK] situations, and his subject used *the* almost exclusively in the [+SR, +HK] and [-SR, +HK] cases. Based on this data, he suggested that his subject might initially associate *the* with the feature of [+HK]. Huebner, building on an earlier model proposed by Bickerton (1981), made a semantic classification of the English article system that he entitled the ‘Semantic Wheel’.

Yamada & Matsuura (1982) examined the developmental process of Japanese EFL students acquiring English articles. Their subjects took the same cloze test twice with a one-week interval, and identical responses were considered as “stable responses”; different responses were labelled “unstable responses.” The overall difficulty order for the stable responses were, from easier to harder, *the*, *a/an*,  $\emptyset$ , for their intermediate students (EFL students for five years) and *the*,  $\emptyset$ , *a/an* for their advanced students (EFL students from seven to nine years) (Yamada & Matsuura 1982:59). An interesting finding of this study was that the advanced students showed higher performance than the intermediate students not because they could

replace the stable incorrect responses with stable correct responses, but rather because they could stabilise unstable responses with correct responses. That is to say, items which were consistently incorrectly responded to at the intermediate level were also consistently incorrectly responded to at the advanced level. It could be said that these items had been erroneously “fossilised” (Selinker, 1972) with the intermediate level subjects (Yamada & Matsuura 1982: 54). One of the major problems with this study was that Yamada & Matsuura examined: neither (i) any lexical items that were following the articles; nor (ii) the semantic properties (according to Huebner, for example) in which the articles were to be found. Moreover, the test results for each item, as well as the test itself, were absent from their paper making it difficult to identify the causes of the errors being committed.

Master (1990; 1994) produced a simplified framework, reducing article use to a meaning contrast between: (i) classification signalled by *a* or  $\emptyset$ ; and (ii) identification signalled by *the*. Referring to his 1986 study, Master also offers evidence (1990: 465) that a systematic approach to teaching the article system can result in a significant improvement in test performance. He admits, however, that this improvement might have arisen from ‘the focussing of students’ attention on the need for articles in English rather than from any explicit method for choosing the articles correctly. Master also supports Huebner’s claim that the L2 learners might associate the definite article with the feature of [+HK] initially.

### 3. Japanese and the Notion of Articles

Section (3) comprises of two sub-sections: in (3.1), demonstratives and definiteness marking in Japanese will be examined; and in (3.2), the deeply rooted sociolinguistic tradition of *yakudoku* (word-by-word translation) will be explained. This is important if we are to understand the reasons behind

article selection of Japanese EFL students. I believe that this forms the first step, in a two-part process of article selection. The second step being based on the type of lexical item occurring in contexts local to the article being selected.

### 3.1 The Japanese System

#### 3.1.1 Japanese Demonstratives

The way that the definite article is translated into the L1 is also problematic. This is often translated as *sono* ‘that’ when a Japanese EFL teacher wishes to denote specificity in the TL. *Sono* is used for an object which is closer to the hearer than the speaker, and is used also in cases involving an object or event that is not visible but already a part of the mutual understanding between the two (Kuno 1973). *Sono* certainly does not correspond directly to *the* in English. The usage of the latter would seem to be more obligatory in the TL than that of the former in the L1. I would probably agree with Lyons’ decision of rejecting the claim by Givón (1978) that *sono* is a definite article (Lyons 1999). It does form a group: *kono, sono, ano* (*kore, sore, are*) and neatly corresponds (pragmatically) to the English demonstratives ‘this’, ‘that’ and ‘that over there’ respectively.

#### 3.1.2 Definiteness Marking

Japanese does not have a category of definiteness marking; it does, however, have a category of topic marking. Sometimes, the Japanese topic marker, *wa*, can be translated as the definite article in English. Observe the following, where *wa* introduces new information to the hearer [+SR –HK], and *wa* indicates [+SR +HK] that the information has already been mentioned to the hearer).

*Mukashi mukashi ojiisan ga imashita to obaasan ga imashita. Ojiisan wa*

*daikusan deshita. Obaasan wa kangofusan deshita.*

Long ago there was **an** old man and **an** old woman. **The** old man was a carpenter. **The** old woman was a nurse.

It must be noted that the patterns *ga ... imasu* and *wa ... desu* are fairly fixed collocational occurrences. Also, by its very nature, as introducing a new topic, the particle **wa** tends to be contrastive in nature. Thus, the second and third sentences above, can be translated literally as “and as for the old man, **he** was a carpenter”; and “as for the old woman, **she** was a nurse”, where the accent indicates emphasis. In Japanese, an NP marked with *wa* can only be rendered into English as definite or generic; NPs marked with *ga* (the subject marker), however, can be definite or indefinite (Lyons 1999:233). Observe the following question item numbers (26) and (27), which, if we employ the use of *sono* ‘that’, a change from generic form to specific form will result:

1. Inu **wa** petto ni tekishiteimasu (generic).
  2. **Sono** inu **wa** petto ni tekishiteimasu (specific).  
That dog SUBJ. pet DATIVE is suitable
- [26]Ø{1.3} dogs make [27]Ø{1.3} good pets.

In sum, it can be observed that although the L1 does recognise plurality; specificity/non-specificity and definiteness to a certain extent, they are very different to their L2 counterparts.

### 3.2 The Way Japanese<sup>1</sup> are Taught the English Article System

#### 3.2.1 Yakudoku

The mainstream of English teaching in Japan is ‘yakudoku’ (Hino 1988:45; Gorsuch 1997). Yakudoku has been described as a mental process for reading a foreign language in which the TL sentence is first translated word-by-word into the L1. The resulting translation is then reordered so

that it can be comprehended in the L1. Finally, it is re-coded according to the rules of Japanese syntax (Kawasumi 1975). One of the major problems with the yakudoku method is that the meaning can only be understood in the L1 after it has been translated (Ueda 1979). This has serious implications for the acquisition of something as complex as the English article system. Obviously, a word-by-word translation is clearly going to be problematic, especially at the discoursal level, where one may have to refer back to the anaphoric reference of a second mention item. Also, pragmatically, it is very difficult to give a translation of a concept that involves ‘specificity’ in the TL, but not in the L1 as in the following example:

A: Where are [35]the{2.5} car keys?

B: I left them on [36]the{2.5} desk in front of [37]the{2.5} window.

### 3.2.2 ‘Rules of Thumb’

Let us now examine following basic rules concerning the English article system that the subjects in this study had been taught:

1. The indefinite article *a* has a basic meaning of *one*.
2. The definite article *the* has a basic meaning of *sono (that)*.
3. The definite article is related to *uniqueness* and thus occurs in the context of ‘adjectives with ranking’.
4. When an object or event is introduced for the first time, *a* should be used. But when the same object or event is mentioned for the second time, *the* should be used.
5. When an NP is countable, *a* is used; if it is noncount,  $\emptyset$  should be used.
6. When an object of an event is specific, *the* should be used.

In attempting to ‘simplify’ the article system to a few general rules of thumb, students are being misled. Let us examine the first ‘rule’. Surely this first definition is going to have a big impact on the students (it is not only the first ‘rule’ that they are introduced to, but it also equates nicely with the Japanese *hitotsu* (see 3.2.1 above)) and consequently it will be

harder to introduce other more subtle meanings later on (see Swan 1980: pt. 66). According to Berry (1991: 255), however, one of the most misleading definitions is that stated in ‘rule’ (4) above. An example of just how confusing this is can be exemplified here in item (14):

Utada Hikaru is one of those remarkable women who [lapse of 66 words] ...  
Hikaru is [14]a{4.1} woman who....

Item (14) is, in a sense, a case of second mention. The first mention, although not using the indefinite article as such, could nevertheless be substituted by an NP containing *a* without altering the meaning too much, for example:

Utada Hikaru is a remarkable woman who [lapse of 66 words] ... Hikaru is  
[14]a{4.1} woman who....

Fourteen out of the fifteen native speakers, however, considered the second mention more appropriate with an indefinite article than a definite one. One person in the control group did consider the definite article more appropriate and thus confirmed the fact that there is not unanimity even among native English speakers.

Upon examination of the Japanese EFL textbooks (e.g. Obunsha 1988), one is also left with the impression that very little emphasis is given to the  $\emptyset$  article: most of the discussion tends to be a comparison of *a* and *the* to the extent that somewhat low frequency constructions are introduced. For example, in the case of superlatives, students are taught that the indefinite article is possible before them in certain contexts:

He had *a* most beautiful daughter.

The students’ attention is also drawn to the fact that the indefinite *a* is used in the following cases, “*a* first step”, and “*a* last resort” (Obunsha 1988: 132). The above example would seem a little archaic and perhaps not all that useful to the student. Presenting a list rules, a list of exceptions to



these rules, and then testing students accordingly, would appear to be one of the most widely accepted practices among the Japanese EFL teacher (see Hino 1988; Gorsuch 1997).

#### **4.1 Procedure**

A test was constructed which consisted of two sections. The first section was a piece of discourse that was based on a famous Japanese pop singer Utada Hikaru with whom the subjects were well acquainted. The second part of the test focussed mainly on material of a conversational nature. An attempt was made to provide a clear context for the questions and consequently many of them consisted of dialogues, multi-sentential/multi-clausal units. Only where it was certain that no ambiguity would arise, were single clause units employed. In all, the subjects had a good balance of the different types of constructions that exist in English. Again, topics with which the subjects were familiar were chosen and lexical items of low frequency were deliberately kept to a minimum.

The test was then sent out to two different institutions in Aichi Prefecture: (i) a high school involving second graders (n=50) hereinafter referred to as J1; and (ii) a university involving non-English major freshmen (n=52) hereinafter referred to as J2. None of the subjects in either sample had spent any period of time studying English abroad.

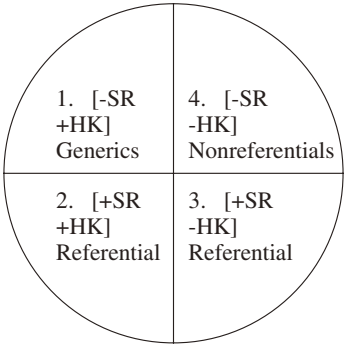
A control group consisting of 15 native speakers of English (NSE) was used to provide the answers to the tests that were later taken by the JSE subjects. The NSE group comprised adults working mainly as English instructors (n=10); PhD students studying in the UK (n=3); or others working in professional careers (n=2), and included the following nationalities: UK (n=5); Canada (n=5); and USA (n=5). Any questions involving NSE variation were removed from the study. Four questions were deemed unreliable:

(18), (46), (59) & (60) wherein a large proportion of the NS considered it possible that either a zero article ( $\emptyset$ ) or article could be acceptable. Hence, it was decided that either answer would be deemed ‘correct’.

### 4.2 Huebner’s Model

Huebner’s Model in which referentiality is classified by the binary features *specific referent* [ $\pm$ SR] and hearer’s knowledge [ $\pm$ HK].

**Fig. 1 Huebner’s Semantic Wheel**



Based on Huebner’s semantic wheel (1983; 1985) (see Fig. 1 above), the test items were divided into the following categories below. The original framework has been kept intact (except for the fifth category which I have called ‘collocations’ and consists of set phrases, idiomatic uses involving the article, and other strong collocations). The subcategories have been based on Huebner’s model but adapted somewhat to accommodate the items set out in the test. Actual examples from the test appear in the right hand column; and the code numbers provided in the left hand column also appear in the test answer sheet in Appendix 1 (as well as in the example sentences appearing elsewhere in the main body of this text).

## 1 [-SR +HK] generics: [a/an], [the], [Ø]

1.1 [a/an] generic:

1.2 [the] generic:

1.3 [Ø] generic:                      Ø Dogs make Ø good pets

## 2 [+SR +HK] Referential definites [the]

2.1 [the] Unique in all contexts: The pope is from Poland.

She... debuted with a single called "...". The

2.2 [the] Anaphoric reference:      single was a success.

John caught a trout and a salmon. Then he put

2.3 [the] Specific by entailment: the fish into a basket.

2.4 [the] Exophoric:                  Can I use the car tonight?

2.5 [the] Specific by definition:    Utada climbed to the top.

## 3 [+SR -HK] Referential indefinites, first mention: [a/an], [Ø]

She... debuted with a single called "...". The

3.1 [a/an] Referential indefinite:   single was a success.

3.2 [Ø] Referential indefinite:      She started writing Ø songs in English.

## 4 [-SR -HK] Non-referentials: [a/an], [Ø]

If I won the/- *Takarakuji*, I'd buy a mansion

4.1 [a/an] Non-specific indefinite: in Tokyo.

4.2 [Ø] Non-specific indefinite:    What Ø video would you recommend?

## 5 Strong collocations [a/an], [the], [Ø]

5.1 [a/an] Strong collocations:    Set a record;    In the space of a ...

5.2 [the] Strong collocations:      Do you have the time?

5.3 [Ø] Strong collocations:

In category (3), I have followed Tarone & Parrish (1998) in that in addition to 'first mention in a discourse', I have also included 'first mention NPs following existential *have* and assumed not known to the hearer' (1988:27). For example,

My apartment has [41]a{3.1} tatami room.

Category (4), includes NPs that are: interrogative, negative, equative, or in the scope of irrealis (e.g. in (4.1) above). Sometimes it is difficult to categorise some of the items. Question number (14) is one such case since it is an equative type construction, but it is also anaphorically referring

back to what has already been mentioned: i.e. Utada Hikaru. As noted in (3.2.2), one of the native speakers also thought that it was a (2.2) type construction and chose as its answer the definite article.

Also difficult to categorise is the Ø article in (1) and (4) of Huebner’s model. There has been much debate among linguists as to whether some NPs should be classed as generic or whether they should be classed as non-specific (see Quirk et. al.1985; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999 for a good introduction; and Kratzer 1995 for more details). According to Quirk et. al. (1985:265), generic NPs are referring to the whole class or species generally. For example, in questions (26) and (27),

Ø dogs make Ø good pets.

*dogs* and *pets* are referring to the species of dogs generally and the class of pets generally respectively. I have included Ø + noncount noun (e.g. *meat* and *wool*) in category (1). This seems reasonable since Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999:283/4) point out that noncount NPs may also be included in Quirk et. al.’s definition.

New Zealand’s [28]Ø most important exports are [29]Ø meat and [30]Ø wool.

Also, in item (53), *Eurobeat music* is referring to the class of Eurobeat music as a whole; and in item (1), *life* in general i.e. considered as an ‘undifferentiated whole’ (Quirk et. al. 1985).

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Statistical Analysis

**Table 5.1 Number of Questions (n=63) Answered Correctly**

	J1 (n=50)	J2 (n=52)
Mean	30.84	36.25
Standard Deviation	5.82	5.94
Total	1542	1885
Reliability (K-R 20)	.66	.69

After calculating the z-test values, the item numbers ( $p < .05$ ) exhibiting the greatest difference between the two samples were determined as follows: (42), (27), (47), (21), (60) and (34). These questions, then, show the greatest improvement in article acquisition from high school to college level. These will be briefly be examined here, and dealt with more fully below. The first two items involve the greatest differences ( $p < .01$ ), and appear to have been influenced by the word that is local to the ‘node article’ in question. The reason for this choice probably lies in the subjects’ belief that the article is forming a collocation with the preceding and/or following lexical item. It is not clear in these examples whether it is the preceding lexical item or the following one that is exerting the strongest pull.

Do you have [42]the{5.2} time?

[26]Ø{1.3} dogs make [27]Ø{1.3} good pets.

In (42) and (27), the percentages of J1 subjects believing that an indefinite article was required were 74% and 50% respectively. In (42), it seems that it is the idiomatic usage of *the* occurring after *have* that is problematic for Japanese EFL students, as there are no particles marking any of the lexical items in the L1.

There is evidence of J1 subjects using the pattern *have* + *a*; and *a* + *good*. In (47) and (60), J1 subjects tended to overgeneralise with the definite article in the domains of non-specific referent and first mention item respectively.

If I won [46]the/{2.4} *Takarakuji*, I’d buy [47]a{4.1} mansion in Tokyo.

John caught [59]a/Ø{3.1/3.2} salmon and [60] a/Ø {3.1/3.2} trout. Then he put [61]the{2.3} fish into a basket.

This was not surprising as similar studies to this one contain similar findings. Yamada & Matsuura (1982), found that most (i.e. 50%–60%) of the total incorrect responses in their study involved students overspecifying

the nouns in their test. This has also been noted in L1 article acquisition among native English speaking children. Indeed, Thomas (1989: 351) notes that overgeneralisation of the definite article with the feature [+SR] is characteristic, not only with the native speaker acquisition of articles, but also with second language learners. Item number (34), was influenced at a level more local than the above, phonologically, by the initial vowel present in the following word.

A: I went to [33]an{3.1} Italian restaurant for dinner last night.

B: Is that [34]the{2.2} Italian restaurant that has just opened?

The indefinite article (*a/an*) accounted for 48% of J1 responses, of whom 22 subjects thought *an* was the correct answer. Item number (21) was particularly problematic for J1 and seems to have resulted in a misunderstanding between the adverbial quantifier *all* instead of the intended proper noun, '*All Albums Chart*'.

...became [20]Ø{?} number one on [21]the{2.4} '*All Albums Chart*'.

In this case, 50% of J1 thought that the correct response was  $\emptyset$ , compared with 27% of J2.

## 5.2 Overall Difficulty Order of Article Types

Table 5.2 below indicates the types of errors made by the two samples and is based on the one appearing in Yamada & Matsuura (1982:59). Looking at the first column, the article preceding the arrow indicates the correct answer; and the article following the arrow indicates the erroneous answer given<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 5.2**

	J1			J2		
<b>1. The → A/An</b>	416	27%	1st	292	22%	2nd
<b>2. The → Ø</b>	239	15%	3rd	239	18%	3rd
<b>3. A/An → The</b>	161	10%	6th	121	9%	6th
<b>4. A/An → Ø</b>	172	11%	5th	183	14%	4th
<b>5. Ø → The</b>	343	22%	2nd	352	26%	1st
<b>6. Ø → A/An</b>	235	15%	3rd	166	12%	5th
<b>Total:</b>	1566	100%		1353	100%	

Let us briefly examine these results before going on to interpret the individual test items. The first thing to note is the relatively similar degrees of difficulty among the two samples: in both groups, almost half of the errors involved the subjects selecting either an indefinite article instead of a definite one (1) or a definite article instead of a zero article (5). Next, both groups thought that a zero article was needed rather than the correct answer *the* (2). Slightly easier, were items involving an indefinite article rather than a zero article (6); and vice versa (4). Finally, the easiest for both samples were items which involved the definite article replacing an indefinite article (3).

### **5.3 Localised Contexts:**

Many of the subjects from both samples had difficulty with the test items. While it true that some patterns do emerge on the basis of Huebner's classification above most of the subjects tended to base their choices on the local contextual cues of lexical items appearing (in most cases) immediately before/after the node article. This is, however, probably put a little simplistically and if one is to understand the complete process it is necessary to take into account what was stated above regarding the sociolinguistic phenomenon of yakudoku (3.2) and the word re-ordering process. That is

to say, when the sentence has been broken up and rearranged, the subjects probably look even more closely at the NP and its article. Since the NP is moved in one chunk to another position in the sentence, it becomes separated from some of its neighbouring words originally present in the L2 version. Consequently, subjects invariably result to selecting articles on the basis of what they erroneously consider to be a grammatical collocation. Let us examine some of the subjects' errors and the localised patterns they form.

The results indicated in rows (1) and (3) (See 5.2 above) were a little surprising: in both cases, it had originally been anticipated that there would have been (a) a stronger trend towards 'overspecification' in the former; and (b) that 'underspecification' would have been weaker in the latter (see Yamada & Matsuura 1982; Master 1987). This is where the research questions, presented in the introduction, needed to be raised. In attempting to answer the first research question, it seemed appropriate to categorise any items (phonological, lexical, grammatical) that were influencing the subjects' choice of article. The following categories were studied in order to identify any error trends among the two samples:

1. Lexical items beginning with a vowel.
2. Superlatives and other lexical items ending in *-est*.
3. Adjectives: *good, large, new, wonderful*; and adverb: *very*.
4. Verbs such as *be, have, got, need*.
5. Prepositions such as *in, on, at, with*.

In item (4), both samples were distracted by the lexical item *age* in which the indefinite article *an* attracted 21 subjects from J1 and 12 from J2. Item number (5) was preceded by the preposition *on* which is thought to have distracted 20 subjects from J1 and 15 from J2. Item number (7) seemed particularly problematic for J2 who scored the same as their J1 counterparts with 15 (remember that according to the z-test, J2 should



be scoring 11% higher than J1). Looking at item (6), however, it can be noted that if we look back to its anaphor (i.e. the first mention article *a* + *single*), it also attracted 17 for J1 and 12 for J2. This would seem to indicate that roughly one-third of both samples lack an understanding of one of the ‘basic rules of thumb’ which they had been taught (see 33/34 & 59/60/61). Item number (11) was of the same type as item number (4) above. This time, the lexical item following the article in question was *attention* and attracted a massive 34 subjects from J1 (only 4 students chose *the*), and a still comparatively high figure of 26 for J2.

Superlatives, and indeed any other lexical items ending in *-est*, were particularly problematic in both samples. Question items of this type were as follows: (2), (15), (17), (28), (49), (57). These items, to varying degrees, tended to attract the definite article *the*, in accordance with rule number (3) in (3.2.1 above). So much so, that even with items that were not superlative the subjects may have been providing the definite article on the basis of its *-est* ending. One case in particular was item number (2) *modest*. Let us compare item (2) *modest* with item (57) *honest*. In the former, 44% of J1 and 42% of J2 thought that the correct answer was *the*; compared with, 14% of J1; and 17% of J2 in the latter. Since both samples of subjects were unfamiliar with the lexical item in the former, it is my contention that they could have been resorting to guessing strategies based on their intuitions with the pattern *the* + *-est*. Item (17) was one of the easiest questions for both samples (featured among the top ten items) with 78% correct for J1 and 98% correct for J2. Both samples, however, were employing the same strategy for all *-est* type questions with the result that for *best* in item (15); and *most* in (28) and (49), in which the  $\emptyset$  article was required. The correct scores for the three items ranged from only 4%-16% and 14%-21% for J1 and J2 respectively; with 72%-86%

and 77%-83% selecting *the* for J1 and J2 respectively.

Adjectives: *good, large, new, wonderful*; and adverb: *very*. These occurred in item numbers: (2), (9), (16), (27), (44), (52), (53). These were among the easiest for the subjects, however, most overgeneralised to the extent that they used the indefinite article with all categories. There were two items that required the  $\emptyset$  article, rather than the indefinite. Problematic questions, not following the pattern 'adjective' + *a*, are as follows: (2) and (27). The latter is particularly interesting as there are two other occurrences of *good* in items (44) and (53) which act a control for (27). In the latter, 64% (J1) and 39% (J2) thought that the indefinite article was needed instead of the  $\emptyset$  (see 4.2 and 5.1 above for more details related to this item).

Verbs such as *be* (8), (14), (15), (31), (35), (39) and (44); and *have* (41), (42), (43), (45) and (53) exhibited the following trend among both samples: *be/have* + *a*. This type of construction is one of the first patterns to be mastered by native English children (Beaumont and Gallaway (1994: 170). When translated via the Yakudoku Method, cases such as these, involving *be* or *have* + *a* in object or complement positions, translate neatly into *wa* in the L1. Interestingly, in item (15), the superlative seems to exert a stronger pull on the 'collocation' *the* + *best*, than *be* + *a*. As indicated above, this question received 72% of J1's total responses regarding the former pattern, while 12% went with the latter one (only 16% answered correctly with  $\emptyset$ ). Items contrary to the pattern *be* + *a* were items (35) and (39) which both had *be* + *the* as the correct answer. These were problematic for both samples, especially the latter which received 30% (J1) and 37% (J2) of the total responses for the pattern *be* + *a*. A similar situation exists with *have*. All items involved the pattern *have* + *a* with the exception of (42) which had the set phrase: *have the time*. As mentioned in (5.1) above, this was only problematic for J1. The results for the (erroneous) pattern *have*

+ *a time* were 74% (J1) and 31% (J2).

Although not as strong as any of the other four categories, there does exist, nevertheless, a weak trend for items involving prepositions. These are listed as follows: *in* + *a* (2), (13), (19), (22) and (63); (and to a certain extent *on* + *a* (5), (10), (21) and (36)); *of* +  $\emptyset$  (23) and (25); *with* + *the* (17) and (51); and *to* + *the* (24), (33), (50) and (56). These items are, by their very nature, positioned before the article. This means that there is some overlap between these and the other four categories listed above.

To sum up then, it would seem that the categories (1-4) above have the strongest influence on article selection among elementary and intermediate Japanese EFL students. So robust are some of the outcomes (especially superlatives) that they tend to override all the other categories (prepositions for example) and act as the ‘default’ choice so to speak. In the broader context of semantics, the default seems to be with local choices as opposed to the framework proposed by Bickerton (1981) and Huebner (1983; 1985).

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Summary**

It would appear that the majority of Japanese EFL students in the two groups have not yet reached an understanding of English discursal article usage. Their selection process is not arbitrary. Rather, their default in choosing an appropriate article would seem to hinge more on looking locally to the following (or to a lesser extent previous) lexical item to such an extent that the subjects often seemed influenced by the vowel of the following lexical item or perhaps even the –est ending (indicating the pattern *the* + *est*).

No system of categorising seems adequate enough for identifying L1

article errors in English. The purpose of this essay was not to introduce yet another system, but to draw attention to the fact that the other systems may have been overlooking certain crucial areas, (i.e. localised selection process). The results from previous studies could have been swayed, not so much by *speaker referents* and *information known to the hearer*, but by the nature of the lexical items directly before or after the node article. Since the actual test is usually absent from such studies, proving this is difficult. The results from this experiment have certainly shown that Japanese EFL students are greatly influenced by local contextual cues in the lexical item the article.

## 6.2 Limitations

This study limited itself to the data collected from a cloze test exercise in which students had to fill in the blanks with one of four possible answers (*a, an, the, Ø*). When the subjects were faced with a question that they could not understand they probably reverted to guessing strategies, perhaps based on the knowledge of what they erroneously considered to be a collocation (as briefly mentioned in Section 2, Master also acknowledges the fact that in cloze tests, students may be more conscious in their efforts to supply articles). In real life situations, whether learners are trying to communicate verbally or by written means, they may opt to use one particular ‘safe’ article (and thus overgeneralise) or omit articles altogether when they are at a loss.

Also, with only 63 items one could not obtain as much information as one might have wanted. For example, while the *the + -est* pattern in item (2) did appear to indicate that both J1 and J2 were choosing the definite article as their first preference, one question alone is hardly conclusive evidence that this was the cause for their choice. Clearly, more items are

needed in a future test; or else the test could be divided into sections (should length be a problem) and tested at different times.

The lower the students' level the more they tend to rely on static, local contextual cues in their choice of article selection. It would have been interesting to have added a third level of 'advanced' students to this study to discover whether the errors become proportionally less across all the types of articles examined here, or whether students' command in certain areas becomes fossilised.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Refers only to the Japanese subjects in this study

<sup>2</sup> Note that since *a* and *an* are combined here, the total scores will be slightly lower than those appearing in table 5.1

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## Appendix 1

**Write in the missing (a), (an), or (the) next to the number in the space in the passage. If no word is needed, put a dash (-). Please answer all questions!**

Utada Hikaru is one of those remarkable women who begin [1]Ø{1.3} life in [2]Ø{3.2} very modest circumstances. She started writing [3]Ø{3.2} songs in English at [4]the{2.4} age of ten and debuted on [5]the{2.4} record company “Indie” in New York with [6]a{3.1} single called “Time will tell”. [7]The{2.2} single was [8]a{3.1} success and naturally received [9]a{3.1} large amount of air play on [10]Ø{3.2} FM and AM stations. It soon caught [11]the{5.2} attention of many well-known [12]Ø{?} artists in [13]the{2.1} music industry. Hikaru is [14]a{4.1} woman who will probably be [15]Ø{?} best remembered for setting [16]a{5.1} new record with [17]the{2.1} highest initial points for [18]an/{4.1} “Original Album”. In [19]the{2.4} May 10 issue of Ori-Con, it became [20]Ø{?} number one on [21]the{2.4} ‘All Albums Chart’. In [22]the{5.2} space of [23]a{5.1} mere five months after her debut, Utada had climbed to [24]the{2.3} top of [25]the{2.4} Japanese pop music scene.

[26]Ø{1.3} dogs make [27]Ø{1.3} good pets.

New Zealand’s [28]Ø{?} most important exports are [29]Ø{1.3} meat and [30]Ø{1.3} wool.

A: Is there [31]a{4.1} gasoline station near here?

B: I don’t know, ask [32]the{2.5} man standing over there.

A: I went to [33]an{3.1} Italian restaurant for dinner last night.

B: Is that [34]the{2.2} Italian restaurant that has just opened?

A: Where are [35]the{2.5} car keys?

B: I left them on [36]the{2.5} desk in front of [37]the{2.5} window.

My father gave me [38]a{3.1} watch for my birthday.

[39]The{2.4} pope is from [40]Ø{?} Poland.

My apartment has [41]a{3.1} tatami room.



A: Do you have [42]the{5.2} time?

B: Yes, it's five o' clock.

A: Can you drive?

B: No, I don't even have [43]a{4.1} car.

He's[44]a{4.1}good teacher!

Can I have [45]a{4.1} cookie, please?

If I won [46]the/{2.4} *Takarakuji*, I'd buy [47]a{4.1} mansion in Tokyo.

Son: Can I use [48]the{2.5} car tonight?

Father: Yes, providing you come home early!

Amuro Namie devoted [49]Ø{?} most of her teenage life to [50]Ø{3.2} experiments with [51]Ø{1.3} Euro-beat music.

What [52]a{5.1} wonderful movie it was!

A: Did you have [53]a{5.1} good time?

B: Yes, [54]the{2.3} party was great!

Do you remember [55]the{2.?.} boy who took us to [56]Ø{3.2} Nagoya Station, yesterday?

We knew he must have been [57]an{4.1} honest boy.

What [58]Ø{4.2} video would you recommend?

John caught [59]a/Ø{3.1/3.2} salmon and [60]a/Ø {3.1/3.2} trout. Then he put [61]the{2.3} fish into a basket.

A:[62]The{2.5} milk in this bottle smells strange.

B: Yes, I forgot to put it in [63]the{2.5} fridge.